

Title: “V romane nado geroiia”: Realist Character-Systems in Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*
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Abstract:

The recently revitalized idea of the narrative “character-system” — that is, the systematic interaction of major and minor characters within the boundaries of a narrative, with consequences for both signification and representation — fits uneasily with Dostoevsky’s novels. In one sense, as scholars from Leonid Grossman on have explored, Dostoevsky’s “casts” move in predictable, even formulaic patterns, and these patterns persist from novel to novel. In another sense, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, Dostoevsky realized the most innovative potential of the novel genre by portraying his characters through the projection of their “own” self-conscious “voices” — giving characters a seeming agency in the act of representation that works to bypass the limits of narrative character-systems and challenge the assumption of authorial control. Taken together, these arguments raise the question: how do Dostoevsky’s novels depend on the affordances of novelistic character-systems (on the one hand), and on appearing to subvert their conventions (on the other)? My paper explores the character-system of the novella that most lucidly concentrates these problems, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, 1864). I will argue that both the conventional shape of the novelistic character-system, and the illusion of transcending it, are essential components of Dostoevsky’s realism. I will go on to suggest that Dostoevsky’s own interest was in reasserting the form of the character-system over and above the illusion of its erasure, and that this conservative tendency structures the reader’s experience of characters like the Underground Man with an often unacknowledged force.